

Charles Burnett

an essay in **Fifty Contemporary Directors**, ed. Yvonne Tasker, Routledge.

Chuck Kleinhans

Charles Burnett wrote and directed one widely recognized masterpiece, the neorealist *Killer of Sheep* (1977), and a major achievement in African American film *To Sleep with Anger* (1990). Imbued with a deep humanist vision, a searching concern with characters facing moral and ethical decisions, and a tendency to allegorical expression, Burnett's work has gained critical regard while his career demonstrates the problems of a black American auteur working in the last quarter of the 20th century. From an initial position as an independent feature writer/director/cameraman, Burnett has sustained his career working on a number of Hollywood and television projects which range from accomplished to banal in direction; of these none has had strong commercial success.

Burnett's position can be usefully compared and contrasted with other African American directors. Most successfully within traditional Hollywood terms, comic actor/directors such as Eddie Murphy and Keenen Ivory Wayans sustain their efforts in conventional work with cross-over in mind. Other black directors within the industry such as Albert and Allen Hughes exploited "in the hood" and rap/hip hop sensibilities and themes to gain box office from the racially and culturally diverse viewers who consume black youth culture. In contrast, Spike Lee (very much a New York, not Hollywood, director) turned himself into a celebrity auteur maintaining his distinct style and themes through obvious talent, creative versatility and a hard-sell personality.

In contrast to those working in the commercial mainstream, some independent writer/directors such as Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991) and Haile Gerima (*Sankofa*, 1993) mounted dramatic features deeply resonant with African American history, won a strong critical response, and carefully promoted African American audience interest. An even wider range of creative work has appeared from directors working in more experimental and documentary modes, often university-based such as the late Marlon Riggs, Zeinabu irene Davis and Ayoke Chenzira, or connected with the art/theatre/music world such as Camille Billops and the late Bill Gunn, or documentary and broadcasting such as Bill Greaves and St. Clair Bourne.

Charles Burnett made his first feature drama, *Killer of Sheep*, as his thesis film in the UCLA MFA film program. An episodic slice of life, the film shows the daily routines of a slaughterhouse worker, Stan, interspersed with views of the Los Angeles black community's residents. Stan suffers insomnia, putting him in a liminal world of reduced affect, an emotional state echoed by exterior shots that reveal an urban landscape filled with demolished sites. Scenes with children

playing form a powerful counterpoint to the actions of adults as we see the kids repeating the verbal and physical violence that the adult community exhibits as behavior and symptom. Stan's work preparing sheep sets up an inescapable parallel--that the children are lambs being lead to slaughter.

Particularly poignant moments highlight Stan's inhibited relation with his wife: she urges him to sleep and he cannot. Alone, they dance together to Dinah Washington's slow sad ballad, "This Bitter Earth," but the tenderness never blossoms into a physical consummation; she tries to entice him, but he is unresponsive and then his young daughter comes over and massages his shoulders--the child taking over an adult role while mother and daughter stare at each other. This dysfunctional social world finds an objective correlative in automobiles that don't work, keeping the community penned up in the ghetto. In the most memorable scene, Stan and a buddy buy a used engine on payday to rehabilitate an old car. The optimism is dashed when through their negligence the engine block hits the pavement and cracks.

The soundtrack echoes the screen action with unseen events: a menacing watchdog barking, a car starting with difficulty, police sirens, children's nursery rhymes, the chimes of an ice-cream vendor. A rich music track provides an additional counterpoint, joining commercial blues and soul with classical music and Paul Robson's performances. Already tinged with a bitter irony for African Americans, Robson sings "What is America to Me?" against images of sheep being moved to slaughter. Later slaughterhouse images play against Dinah Washington's slow love ballad, "Unforgettable." Yet the film does not end in naturalist despair. Rather, a bittersweet persistence of hope within this dysfunctional environment appears near the end of the film when an apparently mute young woman shyly but happily reveals to a group of women that she is pregnant. Stan continues to work, to endure, to support his family within a world of diminished opportunity.

Burnett worked on two more films that continue the closely observed study of ghetto masculinity. With *My Brother's Wedding*, another feature length film, he served again as writer/director/cameraman, and he worked as screenwriter and cameraman on Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*.¹ These films continued in the mode of production of low budget independent film. With more critical recognition, Burnett finally directed his screenplay *To Sleep With Anger*, leveraging a larger budget (US \$1.5 million) with star Danny Glover's participation. The film changed Burnett's previous pattern of contrasting exterior cityscapes, workplace, and the social space of the community to the domestic space of home and family, a contrast so pronounced in *Killer of Sheep*. This time the film is grounded in the house of a lower middle class Los Angeles family which becomes infected with a foreign presence, who slowly causes a chaotic crescendo in the family's three generations. Harry (Glover) arrives unexpectedly from "back home" in the Deep South, is welcomed, and stays on and on. Gradually this trickster figure's presence and actions bring out the social situation's underlying contradictions and tensions until the home seems invaded by his cronies, the patriarch suddenly lies paralyzed in bed, the family garden dries up, and the two adult brothers begin fighting. In the film's dramatic

climax, the matriarch intervenes just in time to prevent one son from killing the other.

Harry may have more than a touch of Satan in him (flames appear on his feet at one point), but he is a minor devil at best. He works by finding fault lines which set in motion tremors which can demolish unsteady structures. He's also an engaging rogue, and if our sense of justice is relieved when he dies in an accidental fall, we are also a bit regretful to see him go. Actually, he doesn't go. He dies at the start of a long weekend, and the coroner's office doesn't get around to picking up the body in the kitchen, so the family has to eat picnic style while friends and neighbors come by. Again the mood is bittersweet, with the emphasis on a comedic ending, underlined by the film's buoyant script, excellent acting, slow build up of a sense of community, and reflections on past and present, country and city, and pretense and realism. Although the film concentrates its visual power by bringing all characters into the house, a key scene resonates with wider social power. Following the brothers' fight, they go to a hospital emergency room which we see filled with the physical toll of community instability.

With Burnett's next feature project, *The Glass Shield*, the writer/director adapted a former cop's account of the Los Angeles police. A black rookie is assigned to an all white station filled with violence-prone racists; he tries to fit into an ethos of toughness and covering-up police abuse but he comes to question his own position. Finally awakened, with the unit's only woman, he works to expose the corruption, and in the process finds his life in danger from fellow officers. At last, he loses his job. The film is marked by tense dramatic sequences and an effective use of interiors and night scenes with a haunting blue tone to the visuals. The sets lean toward the abstract (e.g., silhouetted figures against closed window blinds) while the film bends towards the allegorical. Part of this must be by design, but part by its main actor's limited dramatic range and the script's strong black/white dichotomy in racial depiction.² Except for the Jewish female cop and one old jailer, all the white characters are uniformly malevolent racists and all the blacks are model upright minority citizens. The result is an awkward setup. The hero starts out as massively naive; but without any engaging rogues as counterpoint, it's very hard to figure out why he wants to be like the white guys. Part of the problem is in Burnett's adaptation of the story from an autobiographical account which took place many years before when integration of the police force was still a novel matter. By the time the film appeared, big city police departments were (uneasily) integrated, and clearly, violent and corrupt cops were not just an African American vs. White problem. Psychologically nuanced portraits of cops--black and white, male and female, rookies and veterans, moral and abusive--were widely seen on popular TV shows such as *Hill Street Blues*, *Homicide*, *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue* and part of the popular imagination. Lost in the allegory is Burnett's initial creative strength in relating community settings to social psychology and his probing issues of troubled black masculinity.

Following that last attempt at being a feature dramatic writer/director, and with his two Hollywood projects not returning their production costs, Burnett has

worked only as a director. He shot three juvenile dramas for television aimed at the “young adult” segment. *Nightjohn* is the most accomplished, set in 1830s plantation slavery South and portraying the relation between a young slave girl and an older male who teaches her the forbidden knowledge of reading. Well-crafted, the film rests on easily understood pathos to make its points. Two more Burnett projects also use dramatic sentimentalism, but far less successfully. *Selma*, *Lord, Selma* presents two teens who become involved in the famous civil rights march. The film suffers badly in comparison with Spike Lee’s imaginative documentary examining the same period, *Four Little Girls*. In *Finding Buck McHenry* children uncover a mystery surrounding a legendary star of the Negro baseball league while clunky plot points, uneven acting, and heavy handed didacticism limit the film’s impact. Strong acting and carefully crafted filmmaking mark the tv miniseries drama *Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding* which considers the color and class line within an upperclass black community in the 1950s. A recent romantic comedy of elders casts James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave as eccentric loners who unexpectedly fall in love. Superbly shot, *The Annihilation of Fish* seems like a play adapted to film, more theatrical than cinematic. Though screened at festivals, it seems unlikely to find commercial release.

Burnett’s career is best understood set against the backdrop of changes in Hollywood, independent, and black filmmaking. When he began studying film in 1967 contemporary black film was just getting started with Blaxploitation yet to emerge. When *Killer of Sheep* appeared a decade later, Hollywood began to consolidate to a dominant model of High Concept blockbuster filmmaking, but the independent feature phenomenon known as the Sundance film was still a decade away.³ In the 1960s and 70s black artists and intellectuals thought that given gross misrepresentation by Hollywood, the main task was for blacks to make films about themselves. Burnett’s early work fit this pattern with serious dramas set in the inner city African American community. But the trade off for having complete creative control was severely restricted budgets and venues limited to art house, festival, museum, and campus audiences. The temptation of “going Hollywood” for talented artists is strong but the exchange for getting more resources tends to be working in predictable ways in predictable genres (the ghettocentric action film, the black minstrelsy comedy, etc.) and/or loss of creative control. (How Spike Lee has negotiated this tension for a productive career needs close examination.) With time, as more films starring African Americans written and directed by African Americans and aimed at a black audience appeared, especially in the 1990s, it became clear that the “black audience” was not a unified entity in either sensibility, politics, or market. The call to unity that was so forceful in the Civil Rights era as political rhetoric, did not have analytic power in the Millennium’s reality of a consolidating global entertainment marketplace, neoliberal politics, and a growing gap between inner city and middle class African Americans.

Politically aware African American filmmakers (as for feminist, Latino, gay media artists) face the dilemma of negotiating mainstream vs. independent options. Reflecting on his own experience, Burnett observed, “The situation is such that one is always asked to compromise one’s integrity, and if the socially

oriented film is finally made, its showing will generally be limited and the very ones that it is made for and about will probably never see it." (224)⁴ In *Redefining Black Film*, Mark Reid observes,

...production and stylistic freedoms permit black independent filmmakers to experiment with audio, visual, and performance methods that seem unrefined to audiences and film critics reared on Hollywood films. Thus, the use of non-star talent, innovative aural and visual narrative techniques, and abrupt editing (all of which are at odds with the classical Hollywood narrative style) make black independent films different in content and form from studio-distributed black films.⁵

The border between independent vision and mainstream accomplishment formed a basic controversial topic for African American filmmakers and critics for the past 25 years. For all those who have had the opportunity to work Hollywood, the experience has its rough spots. Many of Burnett's supporters charged that *To Sleep With Anger* was sabotaged by bad distribution and publicity. Yet in discussing the film in *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Ed Guerrero remarks on

...the frustrating intersection of independent and mainstream issues debated among black filmmakers. Added to this are the overdetermining, paradoxical problems of winning broad distribution and popular box office support for a film that in its vision and style runs far beyond the colonized appetites of the sex-violence-action trained consumer audience, be it black or white.⁶

In more recent interviews Burnett has spoken of the opportunity to work on larger projects with a professionally skilled creative team and top notch acting talent, the need to make a living and support a family with one's creative work, and the desire to work regularly. His move into television, like that of Julie Dash (e.g., an episode of *Women: Stories of Passion* and a romantic comedy for Black Entertainment Television) and Darnell Martin (*Homicide*, *ER*, *Oz* after her directorial debut with *I Like It Like That* in 1994) reflects what is possible in a bottom-line driven industry in which "film artists" become "content providers" to transnational corporations. In the current phase, the most commercially successful black films by African American directors have been projects such as *Waiting to Exhale* (d. Forest Whitaker), budgeted at US\$15 million with a US theatrical return of \$66.2 million and \$33 million in video rentals and *Soul Food* (d. George Tillman Jr.), a \$43.5 million return on a \$7.5 million budget. At present Bill Duke and Carl Franklin seem to be the most durable directors balancing⁷ serious African American themes with the need for a respectable box office return.

Characteristically soft-spoken, Charles Burnett has moved through life, creative opportunities, and a changing situation for filmmakers with a clear conviction:

...it is the little personal things that begin to give a hint of the larger picture. The story has the effect of allowing us to comprehend things we cannot see, namely feelings and relationships. It may not give you answers but it will allow you to appreciate life, and maybe that is the issue, the ability to find life wonderful and mysterious....One has to work on how to be good, compassionate. One has to approach it like a job. Until there is a sharing of experiences, every man is an island and the inner city will always be a wasteland.⁸

¹Chuck Kleinhans, "Realist Melodrama and the African-American Family: Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*," *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994) 157-166.

²The classic 'rookie exposes corruption' film is Al Pacino in *Serpico* (d. Lumet, 1973). Burnett's film appeared two years after the notable *Deep Cover*, directed by African American Bill Duke and starring Laurence Fishburne.

³For an elaboration see Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) and my "Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams," *New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis, (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 307-327.

⁴"Inner City Blues," *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Pkul Willemen, (London: British Film Institute, 1989) p. 226

⁵(Berkeley: U of California Press, 1993), p. 131

⁶(Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993), p. 170.

⁷

⁸"Inner City Blues," p. 226

⁹